

VQA Ontario

Quality Assurance Processes - Tasting

Sensory evaluation (or tasting) is a cornerstone of the wine evaluation process that VQA Ontario uses to determine if a wine meets the required standard for appellation status. Finished wines are also subject to a comprehensive chemical analysis and a review of the wine content and label claims. Ontario appellation wines offer the consumer a guarantee of origin backed up by a quality assurance program.

The purpose of the tasting is to determine if the wine meets criteria established in regulations at the time it is submitted for testing. These include:

- The wine is free of defects and faults
- The wine is representative of quality wines of its general category (for example Late Harvest or Nouveau wines should exhibit sensory characteristics typical to these wine categories)
- The wine is within an acceptable range of varietal character for the stated varieties (where grape varieties are declared on the label).

Comprehensive control measures are taken to ensure the tasting process is objective and fair and that it is carried out in a consistent manner. All samples are tasted by trained panel of tasters without being identified. Detailed information on the panellists, process and facilities can be found in the appendix to this document.

Tasting to screen out faulty wines and to assure a minimum level of quality is carried out within appellation systems throughout the world. It is almost universal in European wine producing countries and is common in new world countries for all wines of origin or, in some jurisdictions, for wines that are exported. Tasting in the food and wine industry is a well-developed discipline and procedures followed in most jurisdictions, including Ontario, are based on internationally accepted and proven protocols.

For VQA Ontario's purposes, the sensory evaluation is strictly to determine whether the wine meets the standards set out in regulation. The tasting is not a "competition" and unlike wine judging does not seek to compare the wines submitted to identify the best wine or gold medal winners. The ultimate purpose of the VQA tasting is to ensure that the wine is likely to fulfill the consumers expectation based on what appears on the label. For example an appellation of origin wine from Ontario that declares Riesling on the label should be free of common wine faults and show at least some character associated with the Riesling grape variety. Additional expectations beyond the basic VQA standard, such as price, could be communicated directly by the winery to the consumer.

The tasting panel plays an important role in the appellation system by

- Protecting consumers from many faulty wines
- Protecting the reputation and integrity of wines of origin from Ontario
- Promoting the pursuit of quality among VQA wineries
- Providing an independent quality assurance process for all VQA wineries

While tasting cannot guarantee that wine will not degrade after it is tasted, it is the most effective process available to assess wine quality as it is perceived by consumers.

APPENDIX A – DESCRIPTION OF THE VQA TASTING PROCESS

Sensory Evaluation Facilities

- Samples are presented blind in clear glass carafes arranged on white counters positioned against a white background
- Samples are generally evaluated under natural day light conditions
- The sensory evaluation rooms are climate controlled
- Standardized ISO/INAO glasses are used for all samples
- Sensory sessions are monitored for their entire duration to ensure no discussion takes place between tasters.

Sensory Evaluation Panel

- The panel is made up of LCBO Product Consultants selected based on an annual testing conducted by LCBO. The testing includes a written section (on general knowledge, oenology and VQAO regulations) and sensory proficiency testing
- Panel members undergo ongoing training on defects identification, wine quality and VQAO procedures. Training sessions are organized by LCBO and VQAO.
- The panel roster includes at least 24 members (regulars and alternates), grouped into 4 tasting panels. Each panel has 5 members.
- In addition to the Product Consultants panel, samples are evaluated by up to 2 Verifiers. Verifiers are LCBO Quality Assurance tasters qualified to perform this function, which taste the samples under the same conditions as the panel but after the panellists are finished. Verifiers do not know the results of the panel evaluation. They provide an additional quality assurance role by providing a reference value that is then compared with the panel results.

Sample Handling

- Information provided by the winery on the application form for each wine is entered into a central database
- Each sample is then assigned an identification number (VQA - #) and a tasting sequence number. The tasting sequence is determined based on the wine category, varietal composition, wine age (vintage year), residual sugar content, alcoholic strength, etc.
- Two bottles are submitted for the sensory evaluation. If the first bottle does not pass the sensory evaluation, the second bottle is re-tasted by the next available panel (different panellists) using the same procedures. The second bottle is presented with no identification that it is a re-tasting. A “pass” at this second evaluation results in a pass for VQA purposes.

Sample Presentation

- Samples are presented blind to the panel (poured in carafes marked with the VQA identification number and the tasting sequence number). Sparkling wines are kept in their original container to avoid loss of carbonation but are concealed by placing a tightly wrapped corrugated paper sleeve over the bottle.
- All samples are presented at the same temperature, except sparkling wines, which are refrigerated over night. These uniform testing conditions are defined to optimize the perception of the sensory characteristics of the samples.

Data Collection

- Sensory evaluation results are collected electronically using tablet PCs in a wireless environment. This allows for accurate entries, traceable to the taster, which can be further processed and analyzed
- The information provided to the tasters for each sample include: grape varieties, wine category, vintage year, and if applicable, 'unfiltered'. No information that may identify the winery or brand is provided.
- Once a sample assessment is completed, the taster cannot alter the evaluation and there is no mechanism for changing results after fact.

Sensory Methodology

- The method of evaluation is referred to as the LCBO Grading system, a methodology based on the OIV (an international wine standards body) wine rating system. It is a complex arrangement that includes:
 - Category-hedonics ratings. The taster selects qualitative ratings for defined sensory characteristics and attributes. These qualitative ratings are converted by the system to numeric values, which are not displayed to the taster to avoid possible bias. The rated sensory characteristics are: *appearance and colour*, *aroma & bouquet* (with the attributes: correctness, intensity and quality), *taste* (with the attributes: correctness, intensity, finish and quality) and *harmony*. The rating categories range from "excellent" to "unsatisfactory", on a five level scale.
 - Qualifying multiple choice questions are asked to determine if a fault or defect is identified
 - Comments are optional (on the sensory characteristic, product sensory profile or identified faults/defects)
 - Standardized defect terminology is provided for identified faults/defects (the taster selects from a list of standardized descriptors).
- For all identified quality problems, the taster must provide details substantiating the rating, i.e. comments on the identified flaw/defect.
- All tasters are required to answer a Yes/No question about whether the wine is of sufficient overall quality to meet the VQA standard.

- Scores are weighted and calculated by a computerized system and analysed to determine the final score. The score is calculated on a 100-point scale and reported onto a 20-point scale.
- The panel median value is reported. A score of less than 13 out of 20 and failure by a majority of tasters (3 out of 5) results in a failure. Any score less than 13.0 is reported with specific reasons for failure.
- Statistical analysis is used to highlight outlying values. When a discrepancy exists between the panel results, the Verifiers' results are included in the calculation to increase the total number of results for that sample. (Otherwise, the Verifier's results are not included in calculation)

Panel Performance Monitoring

- Statistics are kept on individual tasters' performance to determine the frequency of outlying scores, rating rank, and to determine if they appear to have a particular sensitivity (overly sensitive or unable to detect) to any component. These statistics are prepared for each tasting session.
- Internal sensory proficiency programs are provided by LCBO Quality Assurance. This includes inserting blind samples into the tasting line-up to measure defined proficiency parameters, for example panellist/panel group repeatability & reproducibility, accuracy, identification of defects, etc.

Sensory Analysis as a Discipline

- Sensory analysis is a well-established science in the wine and food industry, and supported by considerable research. There are internationally standardized methods of sensory analysis as well as industry-defined sensory methods that follow similar scientific approaches as other scientific methods of analysis.
- It is established through research that tasters can be trained to detect specific attributes and character at pre-determined thresholds
- Wine faults are well researched, documented and defined, with wine fault aroma kits being widely available to "calibrate" tasters to identify common faults that can occur in the winemaking process such as mercaptans, ethyl acetate and volatile acidity
- The range of wine character is also reasonably well defined and documented around the world with the expected character of specific grape varieties defined on wine aroma wheels and spider plots
- While there is some variability in a sensory evaluation assessment as with any measurement or method of analysis (chemical analyses also bear a degree of uncertainty/margin of error), it is a reliable mechanism to determine whether a wine is "sound" or has a specific fault. For VQA purposes the sensory evaluation is not to "judge" the wine to determine if it deserves a gold medal or is better or worse than its peers but simply to determine if it meets the minimum standards set out in regulation.

Appealing the findings of the tasting panel

- Wines may be submitted to the regular sensory evaluation panel up to 3 times in total
- Wines that are re-blended or otherwise altered may be resubmitted as a new wine
- Rules require a 30-day wait between re-submissions of the same wine but this requirement is often waived if requested
- If a wine fails 3 times (having been through 6 LCBO tastings and a combined total up to 42 tasters), the winery may apply for a tasting by an independent panel (VQAO appeal panel)
- The independent appeal panel is made up of winemakers, sommeliers, academics, and LCBO personnel who are not involved with the regular panel
- The independent panel follows procedures similar to the regular panel but uses paper grading sheets and assigns scores for each attribute on a 20-point scale
- Wines that are the subject of an appeal are always tasted in a line up with at least two other similar wines (based on availability but typically the same vintage, varietal and wine category).
- In the case where the wine fails to pass the independent panel, the refusal to approve may also be appealed to the Alcohol and Gaming Commission tribunal in accordance with Regulation 405 of the VQA Act.